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Congress, Seeking Better Planning of 'Little Wars,' Runs Into Resistance From Military Bureaucracy

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WASHINGTON—In the U.S. defense establishment, some of the fiercest fighting is waged by military bureaucrats in defense of their turf.

For three years, Congress has been trying to create an interagency program for dealing with "little wars" and covert paramilitary operations, such as fighting terrorists. But the effort has been stymied, first by former National Security Adviser John Poindexter, who was overseeing the covert-action network that led to the Iran-Contra scandal, and later by the stolid Pentagon bureaucracy.

Last October, just before the Iran affair became public, Vice Adm. Poindexter wrote a letter assuring the Senate Armed Services Committee that the White House didn't need more help managing covert operations. Coordinating groups within the NSC "have supported the president's participation in such matters on a continuing basis," he declared. According to the recently released Tower Commission report, the "staff" doing most of the covert managing consisted of a single officer, Lt. Col. Oliver North, and a collection of private individuals, some of them foreigners.

Pockets of Resistance

Supposedly, Congress settled the matter last fall by passing a law ordering the new program; about the same time, Adm. Poindexter was swept from office by the scandal. But now lawmakers are up in arms by what they claim are lingering pockets of resistance in the Defense Department.

"They are trying to asphyxiate the infant in his crib," charges Sen. William Cohen, (R., Maine). "The general bureaucracy looks with disdain upon it because it does not bring in any big ticket items."

The Pentagon recently announced a new joint military command required by the law, but it will be located in Tampa, Fla., instead of nearer to Washington, as Congress had preferred. The new assistant secretary of defense who is to watch over the new U.S. Special Operations Command hasn't been named yet and won't be based in the Pentagon building, near the power centers, but will have a rented office in nearby Rosslyn, Va.

Reps. Earl Hutto, (D., Fla.) and Dan Daniel (D., Va.), the chairmen of two House Armed Services subcommittees, have fired off a letter to Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger complaining of "ele-

Covert Command

Components of the new U.S. Special Operations Command:

- Army Special Forces and Rangers.
- Navy Seal units not attached to fleet commands.
- Air Force special-operations forces including specially equipped helicopter, transport and gunship units.
- Special-warfare schools of all three services.

ments" within the agency "who will resort to almost any ploy to keep the legislation from being implemented." The Pentagon denies any sabotage.

'Low Intensity Conflict'

The law requires the NSC to establish a board for what is known in military jargon as a "low intensity conflict," or LIC. The description covers situations ranging from a single terrorist incident to helping friendly forces in small wars, such as the Contra effort in Nicaragua. The NSC board is supposed to draw on the military and logistic skills of both the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency for future covert paramilitary or military support operations. At the Pentagon, the services are required to relinquish control of most of their special operations forces, such as the Army's Rangers, to the new joint command.

Current and past Pentagon officials concede that the agency hasn't been gung-ho about such efforts. Noel Koch, a former deputy assistant secretary of defense, says he spent five years battling for resources to improve U.S. special operations capabilities. The service chiefs, he says, stubbornly resisted any budgetary or manpower shifts that detracted from what they saw as their main mission: preparing for a large conventional war.

Mr. Koch, who resigned from the Pentagon last year, worked with Col. North to carry out the NSC's plan to ship TOW missiles to Iran as part of a hostage trade. He believes the chronic reluctance of the military and the CIA to develop capabilities for small military operations helped tempt Col. North to circumvent the system.

"Their intransigence . . . led to dealing with the problem in other ways. It all came down to Ollie North," Mr. Koch says.

Lawrence Ropka Jr., Mr. Koch's successor who worked with an Air Force spe-

cial operations unit in Thailand during the Vietnam War, says all such units suffered from inattention as the services rebuilt their conventional forces during the 1970s. Officers who became involved in such units also experienced career problems, Mr. Ropka says. Few were promoted to general or admiral.

Image Problems and Pigs

Then there is the image problem. While some special military operations involve "Rambo"-type heroics, the mission of counterinsurgency units can extend to medical aid and help in civic affairs. Mr. Ropka, for example, recalls flying around Thailand carrying a large pig in his helicopter to teach animal husbandry to farmers who were starving because they were systematically killing off the largest animals in their herds. It is work, he says, that is hard to dramatize.

The Pentagon has strenuously resisted moves to upgrade the status of the units that deal with "low intensity conflict." Members of the Joint Chiefs argued that Congress was trying to create a "fifth service" that would cut across traditional lines of military authority. Adm. Poindexter warned that tampering with the president's control over the NSC "would present potential constitutional problems."

Nevertheless, Pentagon spokesmen insist that the military establishment is working as rapidly as possible to comply with the new law, which takes effect April 19. Commanders of U.S. military special operations forces based all over the world were called to Washington in December to plan how they would operate under a single joint command.

"These units are in great shape," insists Mr. Ropka, who is responsible for carrying out the change. "They know how to do their jobs. It's the central control mechanism that needs improvement."

Mr. Ropka, while denying any overall plot against the new office, admits that, relatively speaking, special operations forces don't require much in the way of expensive military hardware. However, he adds, the prospect of larger budgets has already given him a new internal turf battle to deal with: "It's between the civic-action side and the 'Rambo' side of the house."